

## **Between Transparency and Fiction: Photographs of U.S. Infrastructural Construction and Recovery**

### Abstract:

North American landscapes, shaped equally by government infrastructure stimulus policies and by their interpretations in various photographic perspectives, present an ambiguous cultural geography. Urban, ex-urban, rural and other sites oscillate between grandeur and modesty as they are created, repaired and imaged. For example, projects under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, were located in almost every community in the country, from remote and rural stretches of the American West to dense urban centers. Its ambitions were vast and its photographic documentations nuanced. Yet as seen in photographic art it inspired, and particularly upon the backdrop of president Biden's recent bold infrastructural stimulus bill (which echoes the ambition of FDR's New Deal), Obama's plan for recovery, often determined by acts of maintenance rather than renewal, appears prosaic and unphotogenic as compared to programs that preceded and followed it.

This talk focuses on photographic projects that take as their subject America's geographies of urban and ex-urban public works and private development in crucial moments of their evolution. These include WPA/FSA work on the rebuilding efforts during the Great Depression; the critical artistic documentation of urban blight and suburban expansion of the 1960s and 70s; and a recent photographic body trained on measures to restore infrastructure and jobs in the aftermath of the 2008/9 economic recession. How can we understand and interpret infrastructural history today through these images – and vice versa – when reading photographs that emerge under unique historical conditions, (photo) technological advances and changing aesthetic sensibilities? How does the representation of “recovery” or “maintenance” make transparent, embellish, diminish, or fictionalize perceptions of infrastructure as a common good today?

Miriam Paeslack  
Associate Professor  
Arts Management Program/Department of Media Study  
241 Center for the Arts  
University at Buffalo, SUNY  
Buffalo, NY 14260, USA  
[paeslack@buffalo.edu](mailto:paeslack@buffalo.edu)  
[www.paeslack.org](http://www.paeslack.org)